

# **Somalia: Shift in Tactics In the Ogaden**

**An Intelligence Assessment**

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**Key Points**

The Somali Government has recently reduced its military support to the guerrilla forces in Ethiopia's Ogaden region to meet conditions laid down by the United States and other Western countries for badly needed arms support. It is clear, however, that President Siad Barre has not renounced Somalia's extraterritorial claims on its neighbors but is only lowering the level of conflict until its armed forces are rebuilt. Once this has been achieved, Siad will be in a position to resume the struggle to unify the Somali people [redacted]

In making this tactical shift, Siad reportedly has the support of his military and the agreement of the insurgent leadership. This lessens greatly the possibility of an adverse reaction from the armed forces. Siad has maintained his control over the guerrillas, covered his tracks at home, and is prepared to increase military support to the insurgents when he believes the timing is right [redacted]

In spite of periodic tactical shifts, one of the key goals of Mogadiscio's national policy will continue to be unification of the Somali people, by whatever means necessary [redacted]

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**Background**

Since the country's independence in 1960, all Somali governments have subscribed with varying degrees of intensity to the notion that ethnic Somalis—including those in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti—should be united under the flag of the Mogadiscio government. Beginning in 1967, Prime Minister Mohammed Ibrahim Egal, although he did not publicly discard the Greater Somalia policy, tried to improve relations with Ethiopia and Kenya after years of unproductive tension and border skirmishes. The coup that brought Somali President Siad Barre to power in 1969 was partly the result of dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister's moderation.

In the immediate postcoup years, Siad played down the Ogaden issue, recognizing that Somalia was in no position militarily to pursue actively its goals in the region. The Army had been soundly defeated by Ethiopia in 1964 and had done little rebuilding in the succeeding five years. Numerous economic and internal political problems also diverted Mogadiscio's attentions from its ethnic brethren outside its borders.

By 1974, however, Somalia, with the help of the USSR, had substantially strengthened its armed forces. Both in size and weaponry the Somali Army was at least on a par with the Ethiopian military, and there was a corresponding rise in Somali international propaganda efforts directed toward the "liberation" of ethnic Somalis in eastern Kenya, Djibouti, and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia.

<sup>1</sup> Pan-Somalism permeates the basic laws and symbols of national life. The constitution dedicated the Republic, a union of former British and Italian colonial territories, to promote the union of all Somali-inhabited areas; the fundamental laws of the land provide that all Somalis, no matter where they reside, are citizens of the Republic; the flag has a five-pointed star representing the five Somali-inhabited areas ultimately to be united.

The Ethiopian coup in 1974 was at first welcomed by Siad who felt the new—and seemingly like-minded—regime would be willing to hold talks on the Ogaden. His enthusiasm quickly dampened, however, as the nationalistic bent of the Ethiopian regime became evident. In 1975 Siad resurrected the moribund Ogadeni guerrilla organization—now called the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF)—and encouraged it to resume guerrilla operations in the Ogaden. With support from Mogadiscio, the WSLF gradually stepped up its activity against demoralized, thinly spread, poorly supported, and poorly armed Ethiopian garrisons in the south and east. By late 1976 the guerrillas had made significant advances against the Ethiopians.

In early 1977 Siad, spurred on by the continued bloodletting within the Ethiopian ruling circle, Ethiopian setbacks in Eritrea, the termination of the US-Ethiopian military relationship, and—shockingly for the Somalis—the beginning of military sales to Addis Ababa by Moscow, adopted a more aggressive policy. The Somali Government decided to move quickly to capture the Ogaden and adjacent areas before the weakened Ethiopians began to enjoy the full military benefits of their relationship with the Soviets. When at the end of July the WSLF had failed to achieve decisive gains, Mogadiscio introduced its regular Army into the fighting. After eight months of conflict, however, Mogadiscio's Army was forced to withdraw, losing large quantities of military equipment in the process. Its own tactical and political errors and massive amounts of Soviet military assistance to Ethiopian and Cuban troops had left Somalia with a demoralized and militarily weak defense establishment to face the threat of Ethiopian retaliation.

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*The Postwar Period*

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In November 1977 Siad abrogated the friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, expelled all Soviet military and civilian advisers, and terminated Soviet access to Somali military facilities including those constructed primarily or exclusively for Soviet use.<sup>2</sup> Siad was certain that for both political and strategic reasons the West would fill the vacuum left by the Soviets. To Siad's dismay, the West not only failed to rush in to help but subsequently tied the provision of arms to the cessation of Somali military support to the Ogaden guerrillas. Despite the Army's weakened condition, Siad nevertheless chose to continue the confrontation in the Horn. The prewar relationship between the guerrillas and the Somali Army was reestablished, with an office in the Ministry of Defense assuming the task of arming, supplying, training, funding, and directing guerrilla operations. In addition, regular Army personnel were surreptitiously transferred to the guerrillas as advisers and combatants.

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There are a number of explanations for Siad's decision to continue Somalia's involvement in the Ogaden fighting:

- Tribal rivalries that had receded during the war were again coming to the fore.<sup>3</sup> In April 1978 a coup attempt, led by members of a rival tribe, convinced Siad that he must keep the Ogaden issue alive in order to preserve tribal unity within Somalia.

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- Siad has always attempted to portray Somalia as the victim of Ethiopian aggression, and he may have been trying to use the continuing conflict in the Ogaden to provoke an Ethiopian attack that would generate Western "defensive arms" and a political commitment to defend Somalia.

By maintaining military pressure in the Ogaden while the Eritreans continued scoring successes against Addis Ababa in the north, Siad may have hoped to force Ethiopia to negotiate on the Ogaden because it could not afford the continuing drain caused by the two conflicts. The government's success in reversing the tide in Eritrea Province, however, ended this hope.

Siad may have reasoned that continued turmoil in the countryside might induce the Soviet Union to put pressure on Chairman Mengistu to grant some measure of political autonomy to the Ogaden tribes. The Somali President was probably aware of Soviet efforts to negotiate an end to the Eritrean conflict and hoped Moscow would attempt to find an acceptable political solution for the Ogaden as well. For this reason, Siad still maintained diplomatic relations with Moscow.<sup>4</sup>

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*Latest Policy Change*

It appears that Siad has now decided to reduce, though not end, Somali military support to the insurgents.

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Siad badly needs to rejuvenate the Somali Army. During the year since he ordered the withdrawal of Somali armed forces from the region, Siad has received limited amounts of military equipment from other Arab nations and also financial assistance, primarily from Saudi Arabia, to purchase arms. While he has been able to purchase antitank missiles from France and obtain some equipment from Italy, Siad has failed to acquire a Western benefactor willing to provide artillery, aircraft, armor, and related weapon systems.

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Somali military leaders, who reportedly have agreed to Siad's new policy, are probably increasingly concerned over the deterioration of the major weapons in their inventory since the ill-fated attack on Ethiopia. Somalia is not able either to defend against Ethiopian air attacks in northern Somalia or to cope with an Ethiopian attack across the border—an ever present Somali fear. The Somali President probably feels some attempt must now be made to restore the military to its former level of strength and proficiency before he will again be in a position to pursue his irredentist goals in the region.

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His decision was influenced by the fact that Somalia's active support of the Ogadeni tribes has not produced the political benefits he had anticipated. Although the guerrillas have been able to dominate most of the Ogaden countryside, their gains have not been sufficient to challenge seriously Addis Ababa's control. Moreover, the Soviets have not put pressure on the Ethiopians to compromise on the Ogaden issue, and the WSLF has failed to gain international recognition as a liberation movement. Siad probably feels, then, that new tactics designed to rebuild the Somali military would not damage his short-term political goals.

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#### Outlook

The guerrillas operating in the Ogaden are sure to react negatively to the reduction in arms support, but Siad can probably keep them in check. The WSLF political leaders have reportedly acceded to Siad's new policy and have agreed to scale down the level of fighting. Given the dependence of WSLF military forces on Mogadiscio for support, they have, at least for a while, no alternative

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Siad probably hopes that by curtailing his support to the insurgents and eliminating the obvious involvement of regular Army forces with the WSLF, the criteria for arms deliveries by the West will be met without public renunciation of Mogadiscio's Pan-Somali policy. The agreement of the WSLF leadership and Siad's key advisers and military officers gives Siad time to try this new tactic. There is only a slight chance the general population will become aware of this and little they can do even if it becomes common knowledge. Siad is gambling, as he did when he expelled the Soviets, that the response from the West will enable him to rebuild his armed forces; if this does not occur, he could well face criticism of his policies and perhaps another attempt to remove him from office. Siad's position could be endangered by pressure from the guerrillas and frustrated military officers who blame Siad personally for Somalia's weakness and may feel his removal would generate a positive response from the West or perhaps a reconciliation with the Soviet Union.

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Siad, however, is a durable figure who has survived numerous threats to his position and has cautiously preserved his option of making policy shifts. He has maintained his control over the WSLF, has been careful to preserve the guerrillas' fighting capabilities and is prepared quickly to resume the previous level of support. Siad recognizes that while he may be able to make tactical shifts, one of the key goals of Somali national policy must continue to be unification of the Somali people, by whatever means necessary. We foresee no change, by Siad or any other Somali leader, in this objective.

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